DARK HORSE 20 YEARS
BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL
110 $2.99 US
SHORTCUT 4 OF 5
PINUP BY: BRANDON GRAHAM
HIROAKI SAMURA
BLADE
OF THE IMMORTAL
DIRECT SALES
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BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

art and story by

HIROAKI SAMURA

translation by DANA LEWIS
lettering and retouch by TOMOKO SAITO
cover colors by DAN JACKSON

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MANJI
Immortal *rōnin* vowed to protect Rin and aid her in her quest for revenge

RIN
Last heir of the Mutenichi *ryū dōjō* destroyed by the Iitō *ryu*

HABAKI KAGIMURA
Powerful *bangashira* serving the Shogun and seeking the secret of Immortality

BURANDO
Deranged medical examiner saved from prison by Kagimura

MOZEN
Older more traditional medical examiner working for Kagimura

DEWANOSUKE
Manji's cellmate a simple man imprisoned for theft and arson

THE STORY SO FAR

Infected by *kessen-chu*, mystical bloodworms which can heal all wounds and grant their host immortality, Manji's bloodthirst led to the capture and murder of his sister. To atone for this and for the 100 innocent people who died at his hand while he served a corrupt lord, Manji vowed to slay 1,000 evil men in exchange for the release of death.

Manji meets the deceptive Kagimura at a *bakufu* stronghold near Edo Castle, where Manji is ambushed, overwhelmed, and captured. Kagimura assigns two medical examiners, Mōzen and Burando, the task of discovering the secrets of the *kessen-chu*, using Manji's body as their shortcut to immortality. Mōzen botches an experiment and begins to lose his sanity when faced with such an immense task.

designer DEBRA BAILEY editorial intern MATT PYON
editor PHILIP SIMON publisher MIKE RICHARDSON

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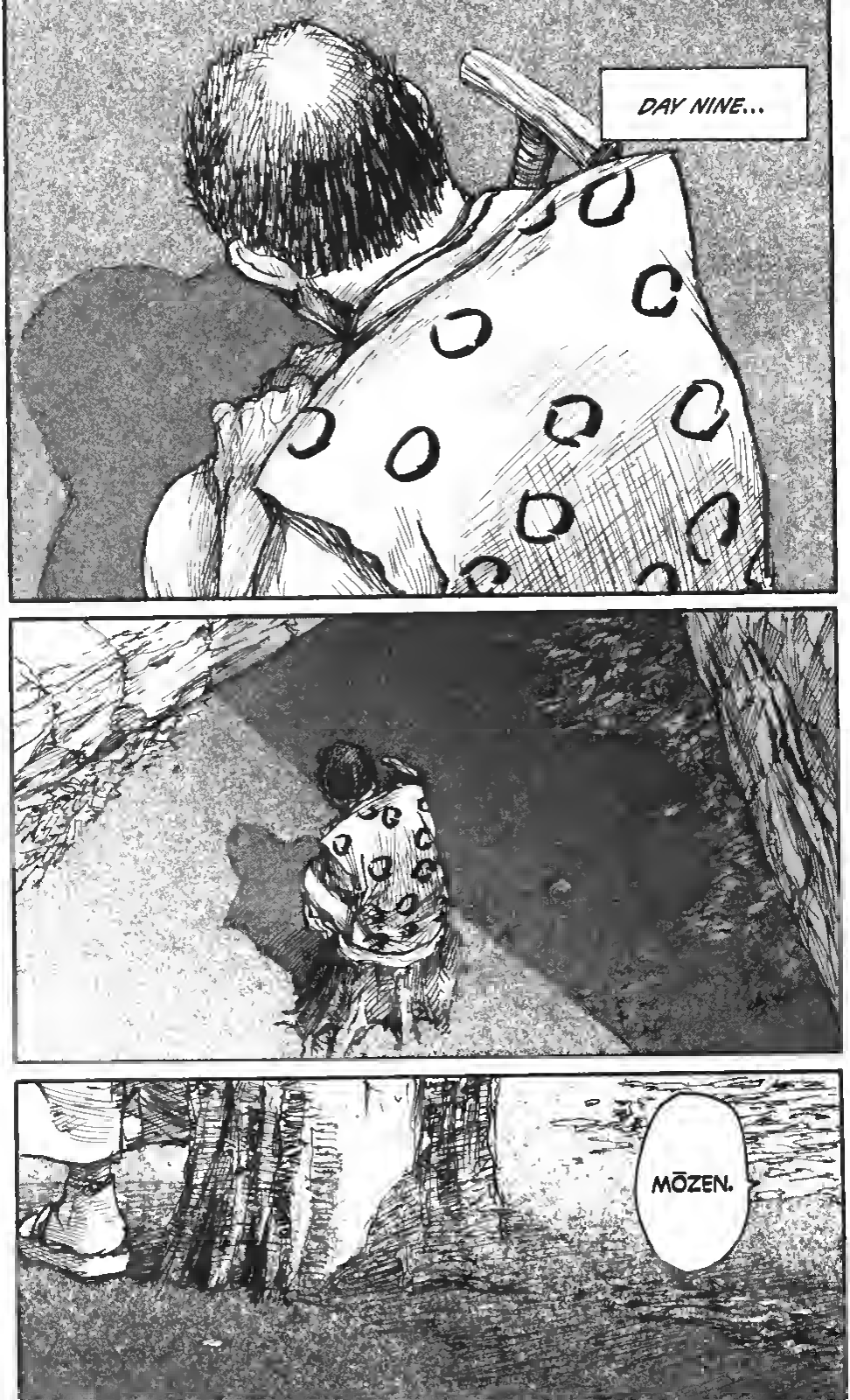
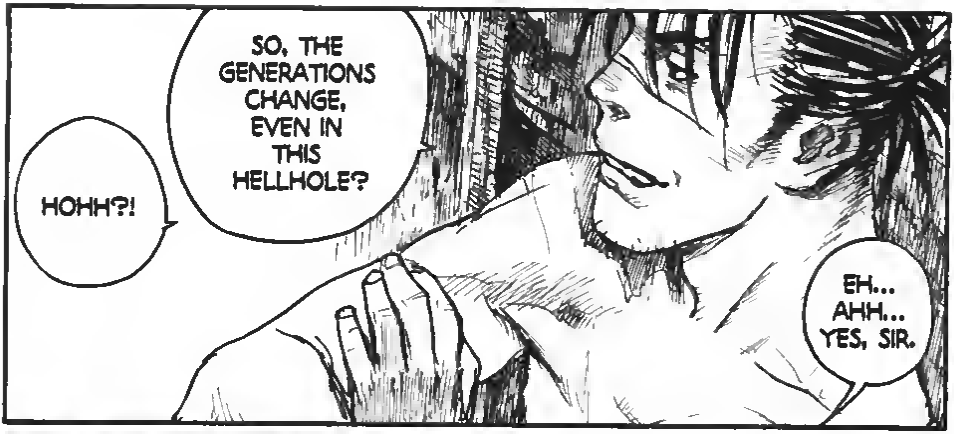
無限の住人

SHORTCUT
-part four-


DAY NINE...
MŌZEN.

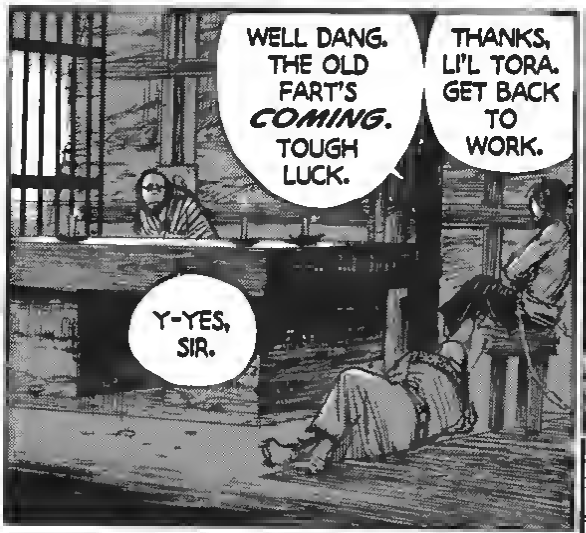
WE WERE WELL AND TRULY AMAZED.
BACK THEN... WHEN YOU CURED THE RŌJŪ'S ELDEST SON OF MALARIA WITH YOUR OWN MEDICINE.
YOU WERE AN OUT-STANDING DOCTOR.
AND YET, KOHŌ-HA THOUGH YOU MAY BE...
...YOU'RE STILL A DOCTOR OF THIS LAND.
THAT YOUNG MAN WHO DEFIED THE SHŌGUNATE TO CROSS THE SEA. CAN HE FIND ANOTHER?
WHAT I SEEK CAN'T BE DONE THE OLD WAY.
THE NEXT EIGHT DAYS WILL TELL.

TORA-EMON!!
TWID-DLING HIS THUMBS?
DON'T KEEP ME WAITING!
WHERE'S THE OLD GEEZER?
M-MŌZEN-DONO... YESTERDAY, HIS EIGHT DAYS WERE UP...
AND... AND...
...THEY... FIRED HIM!


SO, THE GENERATIONS CHANGE, EVEN IN THIS HELLHOLE?
HOHH?!
EH... AHH... YES, SIR.

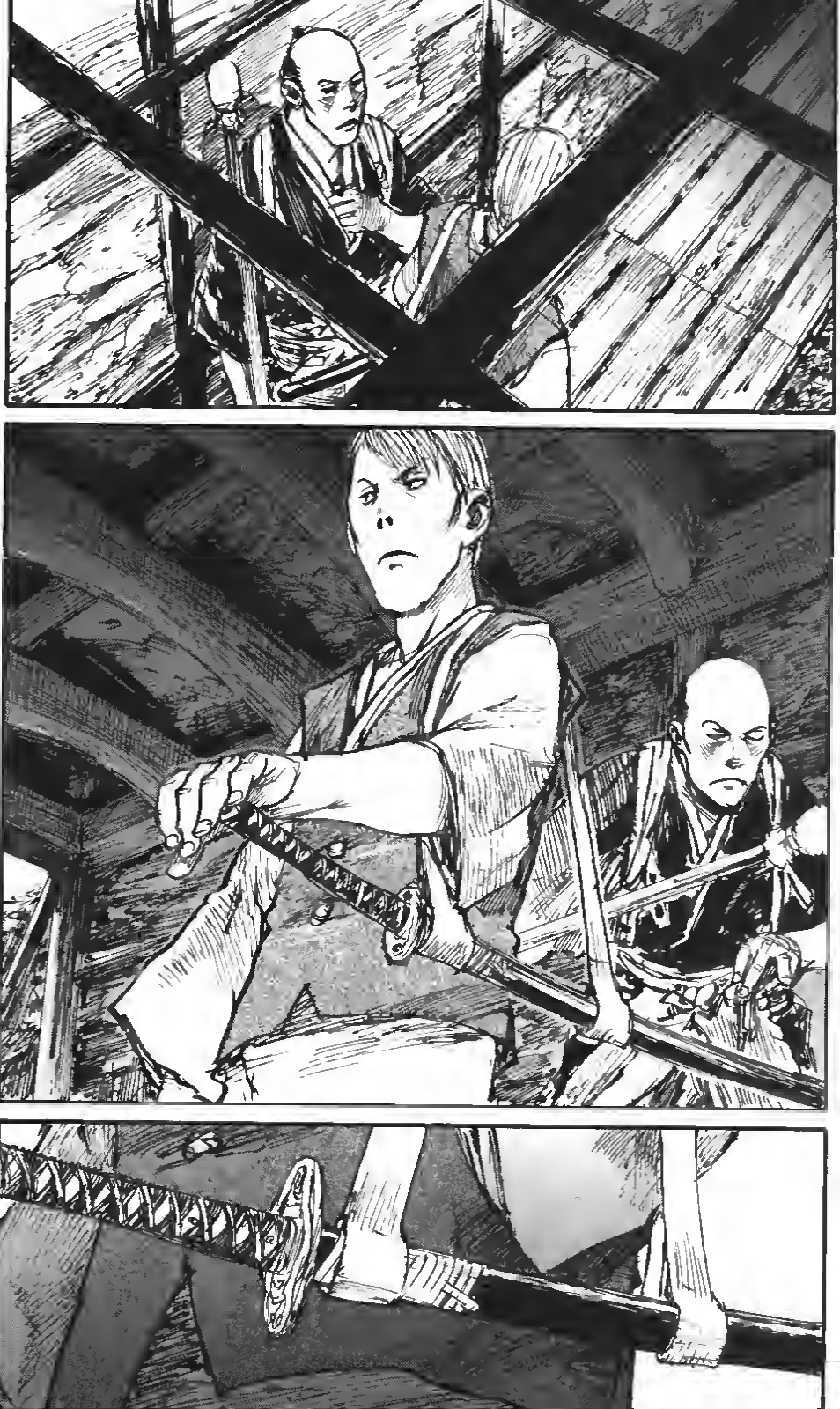
DAMN.
DON'T TELL ME...
...IS GOAT-FACE COMING BACK?

HE'LL COME... I THINK. FOR TODAY...
YOU MEAN HABAKI KAGIMURA-DONO?


WELL DANG. THE OLD FART'S COMING. TOUGH LUCK.
THANKS, LI'L TORA. GET BACK TO WORK.
Y-YES, SIR.

DEWANO-SUKE. YOU HEAR THAT?
YEAH, BOSS. SURE DID.

TODAY.
WE'LL DO IT.
NO SIGNALS.
WHEN I MOVE, YOU MOVE.
GOTCHA!
CLERCH CLERCH
THIS CHANCE WON'T COME AGAIN.
YOU TRIP UP, I'M NOT COMING BACK FOR YOU.
I KNOW IT, BOSS.
!
THEY'RE HERE!



IS THAT SWORD... YOURS?
PARDON ME, DOCTOR.
HA?!
OF COURSE NOT. IT'S BORROWED.
BORROW-ED!
B-BOSS! THIS IS CRAZY!
WE DIDN'T COUNT ON THIS...
WHAT DO WE DO NOW...?
...HEH!

IN OTHER WORDS...
...THE GEEZER MUST HAVE *LEFT IT* WHEN HE JAMMED HIS *HAND* IN ME-
AND... IT GOT SQUEEZED OUT *NOW?*
GUESS SO.
BOSS, THAT BODY OF YOURS GIVES ME THE *CREEPS.*
.....
.....
DEWA-NOSUKE...

WITH ONE OF THESE, IT'S NO BIG DEAL.
NOTHING TO FREAK OUT ABOUT.
WHAT?! WITH THAT DINKY KNIFE?!
IDIOT! KEEP IT DOWN!
NOT IF WE'RE TAKING THAT NEWBIE DOCTOR HOSTAGE.
THE HARD PART... IS IF HABAKI SHOWS. SO LISTEN UP!
WE DO A TRADE FOR THE DOC'S LIFE... GET GOAT-FACE'S SWORDS OFF HIM QUICK.
IF WE PULL THAT OFF, GRAB A BLADE, GET THE CLOTHES OFF THE JAILER, AND RUN LIKE HELL.
.....
.....
THINK THEY'LL LET ME GO?

FROM THE CELL...? YEAH. HABAKI CAN'T RISK HIS LAST DOCTOR.
BUT ONCE WE'RE OUT, ALL BETS ARE OFF.
WE DON'T KNOW WHERE THE HELL IN EDO WE ARE. YOU MIGHT LOSE AN ARM GETTING FREE...
...BUT STAY *HERE*? AND WHAT? THEY MESS WITH YOUR BODY AND *BURY YOU.*
IN *CHAINS* AND *BARELY ARMED*, BUT *STILL*...
...*WE GOTTA HAVE HOPE*, EVEN IN THIS *PIT!*

I JUST HOPE HABAKI DOESN'T SHOW.
...BUT WALTZING IN HERE WITH A SWORD?
MANNA FROM HEAVEN, MAN.
DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S FOR...
AAH?! WHAT'S THE MATTER, BOSS?!
GHARRGH! MY STOM-ACH!
GOSH, BOSS! NOT AGAIN!
ARGH! THE PAIN! THE PAIN! IT'S NOT OF THIS WORLD! HARRRGH!!!
AH?! WHAT IS IT, BOSS? CAN'T HEAR YOU!
SKETCH SKETCH
.....
.....
.....
BOWWOOF
GROSS! YUCK!

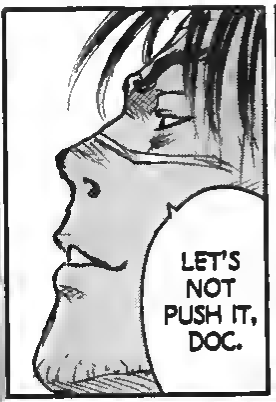
HEY, DOC, LOOK HIM OVER.
HE'S BEEN LIKE THIS SINCE BREAK-FAST.
COLD, SO COLD...
CAN YOU REMEMBER WHAT HE ATE?
SURE I REMEM-BER.
DRIED HERRING AND--

SHR
NG!
-KRSK-
-KHOFF!-
GURRGK
AHH?!

DON'T MOVE!!

TOO SLOW! BUT GO ON... TRY IT.
WHERE'S HIS NECK GO WHEN YOU CRANK ME UP...?
GLP...
SHIT!

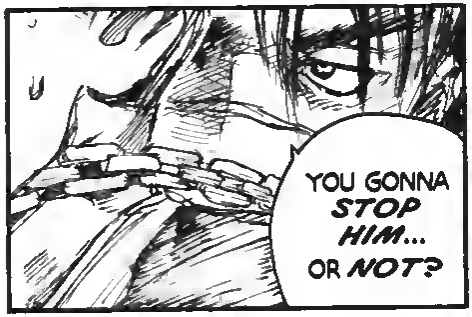
CLANG!
SPARK!


LET'S NOT PUSH IT, DOC.

Ahh

USE THAT CLEVER HEAD OF YOURS.
YOUR SWORD WORK, DOC?

AGAINST A GUY WHO DOESN'T DIE?
AND YOU DON'T THINK YOU'LL GET HURT?


YOU GONNA STOP HIM... OR NOT?

YOU TOO, TURNKEY!
PUT IT DOWN!

YO, DEWA-NOSUKE.
PICK IT UP.
RIGHT!
!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!

'BOUT TIME, GENERAL.
OF COURSE.
MANJI.
GO AHEAD. PICK IT UP...
...IF YOU'VE GIVEN UP ON YOUR *WIFE*, THAT IS.
RRNGN!
DEWA-NO-SUKE!

HEY, HABAKI! I DON'T THINK YOU GET IT.
YOU'RE NOT GIVING THE ORDERS HERE!
.....
.....
...WELL, THEN.
SUGGES-TIONS?
YOU DAMN WELL KNOW!
GET RID OF YOUR SWORDS.
AND YOU, TORAEMON!
UNLOCK THESE DAMN SHACKLES!

I DON'T THINK YOU'LL TRY ANY-THING.
IT'D BE WRITTEN ALL OVER YOUR FACE.
AND THEN?
OWWW!
HEEK! IT HURTS!
FIRST THINGS FIRST! DUMP 'EM!
HOW TEDIOUS...
...BUT SO BE IT. OBSERVE.
I'LL TOSS THIS ONE FIRST.

KONGG

GOD-DAMN!!
...SHIT!

FUCK YOUUUU
!?

HABAKI
!!
!!
FUCK
!!

KOOFF
GOFF!
.....
.....
KCHK

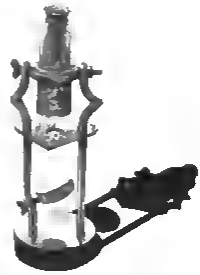
GET YOUR SWORD, BURANDO!
PICK UP YOUR OWN SWORD!
Y-YES! YES, SIR!
PERFECT CHANCE. WHAT YOU TOLD ME THE OTHER DAY... SHOW ME.
HERE AND NOW.

EHH?!
RIGHT... RIGHT NOW?
YES!
IF IT DOESN'T WORK NOW, IT NEVER WILL.
THE TABLE'S SET.
DO IT!
TO BE CONTINUED...!

NEXT MONTH:
SHORTCUT, Part 5 of 5

A peek at Burando's dark past gives a hint at how Kagimura's deranged medical examiner wound up becoming so heartless and twisted. Having survived Kagimura's first few experiments, Manji braces himself for the next test on his body and on the mystical bloodworms that grant him near-immortality. The *kessen-chu* keep their secrets well! It's going to take a lot of bloodshed and pain before Kagimura has his answers! Gorgeous, painted *Rin* cover by Samura-sensei!

無限の住人



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GLOSSARY

Bangashira: Head of the *banshū*

Banshū: Officers serving under the Shogun, usually assigned to Edo Castle to defend the Shogun himself.

Dōjō: A school for combat and self-defense training in martial arts; here, a training center for swordsmanship.

Dono: Archaic honorific used to show respect, usually for someone of higher rank.

Edo: Capitol of pre-modern Japan. Later renamed Tokyo.

Itto-ryū: The radical sword school of Anotsu Kagehisa.

Kessen-chu: The "sacred bloodworms." A person infected by them cannot die but feels pain like a mortal.

Koho-ha: A school of traditional Japanese medicine that placed a renewed emphasis on clinical results.

Mutenichi-ryū: The sword school led by Rin's father (now deceased), destroyed by Anotsu Kagehisa.

Rōjū: A high-ranking government official in charge of the political affairs of the Tokugawa Shogunate.

Ryū: A sword school.

ABOUT THE SWASTIKA

The main character in *Blade of the Immortal*, Manji, has taken the "crux gammata" as both his name and his personal symbol. This symbol is also known as the *swastika*, a name derived from the Sanskrit *svastika* (meaning "welfare," from *su* — "well" + *asti* — "he is"). As a symbol of prosperity and good fortune, the *swastika* was widely used throughout the ancient world (for example, appearing often on Mesopotamian coinage), including North and South America and has been used in Japan as a symbol of Buddhism since ancient times. To be precise, the symbol generally used by Japanese Buddhists is the *sauvastika*, which moves in a counterclockwise direction, and is called the *manji* in Japanese. The *sauvastika* generally stands for night, and often for magical practices. The *swastika*, whose arms point in a clockwise direction, is generally considered a solar symbol. It was this version (the *hakenkreuz*) that was perverted by the Nazis. It is important that readers understand that the *swastika* has ancient and honorable origins, and it is those that apply to this story, which takes place in the 18th century (ca. 1782-3). *There is no anti-Semitic or pro-Nazi meaning behind the use of the symbol in this story. Those meanings did not exist until after 1910.*

ABOUT THE TRANSLATION

The Artwork. The author of *Blade of the Immortal* requested that we make an effort to avoid mirror-imaging his artwork. Some manga are first copied in a mirror-image in order to facilitate the left-to-right reading of the pages. However, Mr. Samura decided that he would rather see his pages reversed via the technique of cutting up the panels and repasting them in reverse order. While we feel that this often leads to problems in panel-to-panel continuity, we place primary importance on the wishes of the creator. Therefore, most of *Blade of the Immortal* has been produced using the "cut and paste" technique. There are, of course, some sequences where it was impossible to do this, and mirror-imaged panels or pages were used instead.

The Sound Effects & Dialogue: Since some of Mr. Samura's sound effects are integral parts of the artwork, the decision was made to leave those in their original Japanese. When it was crucial to the understanding of the panel that the sound effect be in English, however, Mr. Samura chose to redraw the panel. We hope readers will view the un-retouched sound effects as essential portions of Mr. Samura's extraordinary artwork. In addition, Mr. Samura's treatment of dialogue is quite different from that featured in average samurai manga and is considered to be one of the things that has made *Blade* such a huge hit in Japan. Mr. Samura has mixed a variety of linguistic styles in this fantasy story, where some characters speak in the mannered style of old Japan, while others speak as if they were street-corner punks from a bad area of modern-day Tokyo. The anachronistic slang used by some of the characters in the English translation reflects the unusual mix of speech patterns from the original Japanese text.

DARK HORSE
CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

What is past is prologue . . . Twenty years ago, Dark Horse Comics got its start in the backroom of a small comics shop, two idealistic young men pasting together, by hand, the first issue of what would become one of the most celebrated anthologies in comics history. But to today's average reader, that's ancient history. What's it got to with the comics you're reading now? Maybe not very much at all. But the philosophy that was behind Dark Horse's beginnings has everything to do with the books we publish today.

The eighties were an exciting time for comics. The direct market (the distribution of comics to a growing number of comics specialty shops) was booming, lots of new publishers were launching new titles, and a multitude of new creators—as well as the established old guard of comics writers and artists—were finding outlets for material that probably would not have been seen a few years earlier. And all of these new comics helped to create a new niche market: the comics reader.

The reader was typically (but not always) a little older, with maturing tastes and wider areas of interest, who desired something beyond the juvenile power fantasies that were the focus of most mainstream comics. The reader put lie to the conventional comics wisdom that said readers stayed with comics a mere three years before moving on to other interests. The reader, bless him (and her!), viewed comics as a storytelling medium—not just a genre vehicle. And the readers, by the very fact of their existence, helped to birth Dark Horse Comics. See, Mike Richardson and I were readers. The writers and artists who produced Dark Horse's very first titles were readers. As readers, we all wanted to give our readers something a reader would like—no matter what genre the story.

Two decades have passed and we still hold to that publishing philosophy. The market has taken some hits, and the speculators who fueled the boom in the early nineties are long gone, but the readers are still here. Some of you have told us that Dark Horse is the reason you're still reading comics to these many years later. Others of you who have come along since have told us that Dark Horse was the reason you started reading comics in the first place. But whether you've been with us since day one, or just picked up your first Dark Horse comic; whether you're a fan of horror comics or science fiction; whether you want the latest in cutting-edge American comics or the finest manga; or whether you like action-adventure or humor, you're our target audience. You always have been, and you always will be.

If, as Shakespeare said, "what is past is prologue," consider the books we've produced during our first twenty years as a preview of the kind of things you can expect in the next twenty (and beyond). We're just getting started!

—Randy Stradley

DARK HORSE COMICS

JAN/FEB 2006

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